SIDESHOW

AND OTHER STORIES

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Foreword

At the time I met the man who authored the stories that follow, I had reached a crisis point in my own work as a writer of fiction. This gentleman, who was considerably older than I, was several steps ahead of me along the same path. "I have always desired to escape," he said, "from *the grip of show business.*" He said these words to me across the table in a corner booth of the coffee shop where all our meetings took place in the late hours of the night.

We had been first introduced by a waitress working the night shift who noticed we were both insomniacs who came into the coffee shop and sat for many hours smoking cigarettes (the same brand), drinking the terrible decaffeinated coffee they served in that place, and every so often jotting something in the respective notebooks which we both kept at hand. "All of the myths of mankind are nothing but show business," he said to me during our initial meeting. "Everything that we supposedly live by and supposedly die by—whether it's religious scriptures or makeshift slogans—all of it is show business. The rise and fall of empires—show business. Science, philosophy, all of the disciplines under the sun, and even the sun itself, as well as all those other clumps of matter wobbling about in the blackness up there—" he said to me, pointing out the window beside the coffee shop booth in which we sat, "show business, show business, show business." "And what about dreams?" I asked, thinking I might

have hit upon an exception to his dogmatic view, or at least one that he would accept as such. "You mean the dreams of the sort we are having at this moment or the ones we have when we're fortunate enough to sleep?" I told him his point was well taken and withdrew my proposition, having only half-heartedly advanced it in the first place The conversation nevertheless proceeded along the same course—he submitting one example after another of *show business phenomena;* I attempting to propose plausible exceptions to the idiosyncratic doctrine on which he seemed pathologically fixated—until we went our separate ways just before dawn.

That first meeting set the tone and fixed the subject matter of my subsequent encounters in the coffee shop with the gentleman I would come to regard as my lost literary father. I should say that I deliberately encouraged the gentleman's mania and did all I could to keep our conversations focused on it, since I felt that his show business obsession related in the most intimate way with my own quandary, or crisis, as a writer of fiction. What exactly did he mean by "show business?" Why did he find the "essentially show business nature" of all phenomena to be problematic? How did his work as an author coincide, or perhaps oppose, what he called the "show-business world?"

"I make no claims for my writing, nor have any hopes for it as a means for escaping the grip of show business," he said. "Writing is simply another action I perform *on cue.* I order this terrible coffee because I'm in a second-rate coffee shop. I smoke another cigarette because my body tells me it's time to do so. Likewise, I write because I'm *prompted* to write, nothing more."

Seeing an entrance to a matter more closely related to my own immediate interest, or quandary or crisis, I asked him about his writing and specifically about what focus it might be said to have, what "center of interest," as I put it.

"My focus, or center of interest," he said, "has always been the wretched show business of my own life—an auto-

biographical wretchedness that is not even first-rate show business but more like a series of sideshows, senseless episodes without continuity or coherence except that which, by virtue of my being the ringmaster of this miserable circus of sideshows, I assign to it in the most bogus and show businesslike fashion, which of course fails to maintain any genuine effect of continuity or coherence, inevitably so. But this, I've found, is the very essence of show business, all of which in fact is no more than *sideshow* business. The unexpected mutations, the sheer baselessness of beings, the volatility of things.... By necessity we live in a world, a sideshow world, where everything is ultimately peculiar and ultimately ridiculous."

"By what standard?" I interjected, before his words—which had arrived at the very heart of the crisis, quandary, and suffocating cul-de-sac of my existence as a writer of fiction—veered away. "I said 'by what standard,'" I repeated, "is everything considered peculiar and ridiculous?"

After staring at me in a way that suggested he was not only considering my question, but was also evaluating me and my entire world, he replied: "By the standard of that unnamable, unknowable, and no doubt nonexistent order that is *not* show business."

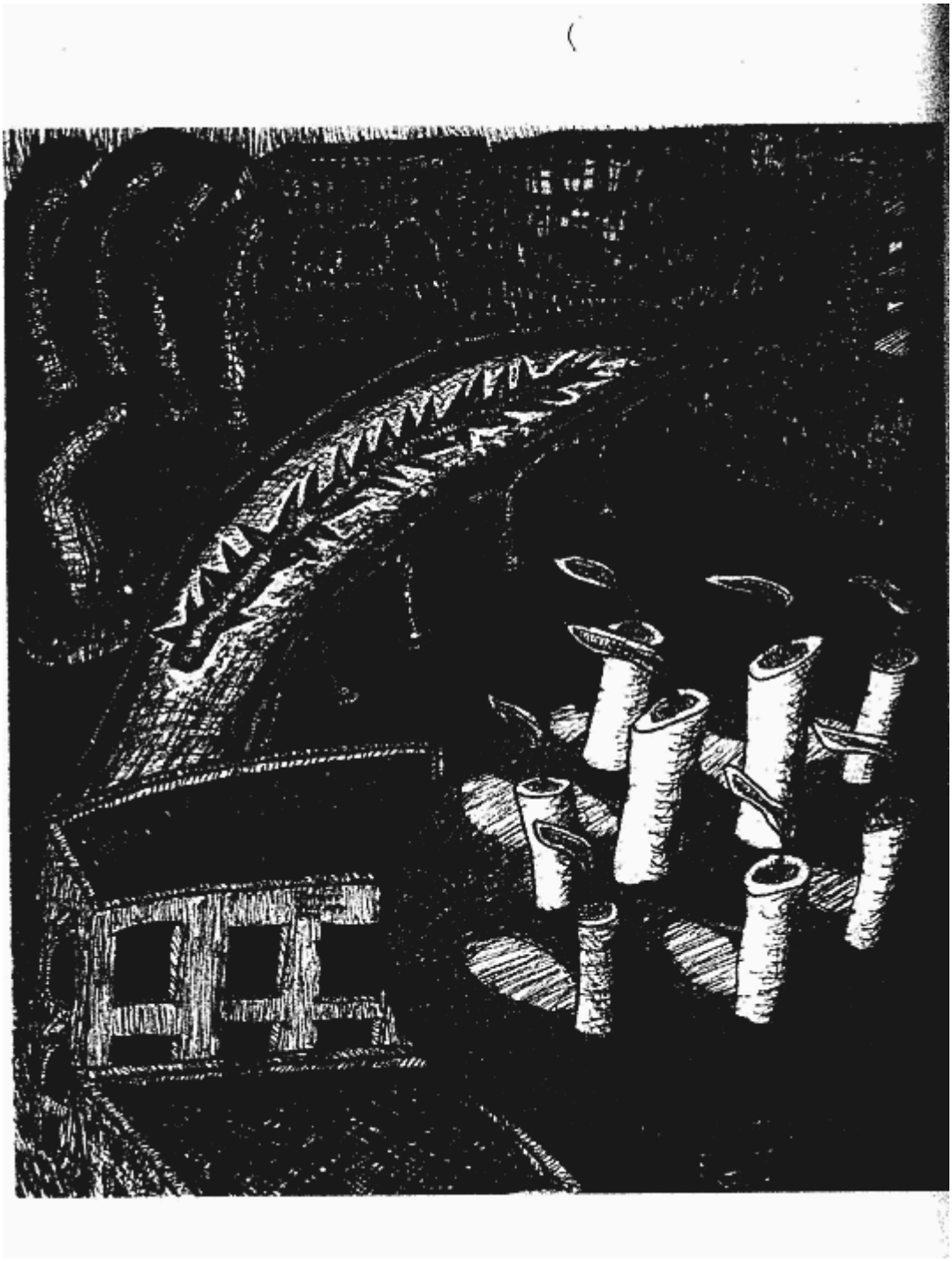
Without speaking another word he slid out of the corner booth, paid his check at the counter cash register, and walked out of the coffee shop.

That was the last occasion on which I spoke with this gentleman and fellow writer. The next time I visited the coffee shop and sat in the corner booth, the waitress who worked the night shift presented me with a small sheaf of pages. "He said to give these to you and that he wouldn't be back for them."

"That's all he said?" I asked.

"That's all," she answered.

I thanked her, ordered a decaffeinated coffee, lit a cigarette, and began to read the tales that follow.



I
The Malignant Matrix

For years I had been privileged to receive frequent and detailed communications regarding the most advanced scientific and metaphysical studies. This information was of a highly specialized nature that seemed to be unknown to the common run of scientists and metaphysicians, yet was nevertheless attainable by such avid nonspecialists as myself, providing of course that one possessed a receptive temperament and willingly opened oneself to certain channels of thought and experience.

One day I received a very special communication whereby I learned that an astounding and quite unexpected breakthrough had been achieved—the culmination, it appeared, of many years of intense scientific and metaphysical study. This breakthrough, the communication informed me, concerned nothing less than the discovery of the true origins of all existential phenomena, both physical and metaphysical—the very source, as I understood the matter, of existence in the broadest possible sense. This special communication also told me that I had been selected to be among those who would be allowed a first-hand view of everything involved in this startling breakthrough discovery, and therefore would

be guaranteed a rare insight into the true origins of all existential phenomena. Since I was an individual who was highly receptive in temperament, I need only present myself at the particular location where this incredible advance in scientific and metaphysical knowledge had occurred.

Scrupulously I followed the directions communicated to me, even though, for reasons that were not explained, I was not fully apprised of the specifics of my actual destination. Nevertheless, I could not help imagining that I would ultimately find myself a visitor at a sophisticated research facility of some kind, a shining labyrinth of the most innovative devices and apparatus of extraordinary complexity. The place where I finally arrived, however, in no way conformed to my simple-minded and deplorably conventional expectations. This scientific and metaphysical installation, as I thought of it, was located in a large building, but one that was very old. I entered it, according to my instructions, through a small door that I found at the end of a dark and narrow alley that ran along the side of the old building. I opened the door and stepped inside, barely able to see two paces in front of me, for by now it was the middle of the night. There was a faint click as the door closed behind my back, and all I could do was wait for my eyesight to adjust to the darkness.

Moonlight shone down through a window somewhere above me and spread dimly across a dirty concrete floor. I could see that I was standing at the bottom of an empty stairwell. I heard faint sounds of something dragging itself directly toward me. Then I saw what it was that emerged from a shadowy area of that dismal place. It was a head supported by a short length of neck on which it pulled itself along like a snail, moving by inches upon the concrete floor. Its features were indistinct yet nonetheless seemed deformed or mutilated, and it was making sounds whose meaning I could not comprehend, its angular jaw opening and closing mechanically. Before the head moved very close to me I noticed

there was something else in another, even more shadowy corner of that bleak, moonlit stairwell. Not much larger than the head that was approaching me across the floor, this other object was to my eyes an almost wholly shapeless mass, quite pale, which I was able to identify as *animated tissue* only because, every so often, it opened itself up like a giant bivalved mollusk found at great suboceanic depths. And it made the same sound as the crawling head was making, both of them crying out at the bottom of that dim and empty stairwell, the place, I had been informed, where I might confront the source of all existential phenomena.

I thought that I might have been misled, as I stood there listening to the cries of those creatures at the bottom of that empty stairwell, and I left that place through the door by which I had entered it. But just as that door was closing behind me I realized how much those sounds I heard reminded me of the tiny voices of things which, however imperfect their form, have been newly thrust into the world of phenomenal existence.

III
Premature Communication

Early one winter morning during my childhood, while I was still lying in bed upstairs, watching a few snowflakes floating outside my bedroom window, I heard a voice from downstairs say these words: "The ice is breaking up on the river." This voice was like no other that was familiar to me. It was very harsh and yet very quiet at the same time, as though a heap of rusted machinery had whispered something from the shadows of an old factory. Nothing else was said by this voice.

When I left my room and went downstairs, I found my parents in the kitchen as they usually were at that time on winter mornings, my father reading the newspaper and my mother preparing breakfast while the same snowflakes which were floating outside the window of my room upstairs were now floating so slowly outside the kitchen window. Before I could say anything to either of my parents, my mother suddenly told me that I would have to stay inside the house for the rest of the day, offering no reason for making this demand. In reaction I asked, in the words of a child, if my confinement to the house that day had anything to do with the words that the voice had spoken, that "the ice was breaking

up on the river." From across the kitchen my father looked up at my mother, neither of them saying a word. In that moment I realized for the first time how many things in the world were entirely unknown to me, how reticent, often wholly silent, were the people and places of my small childhood world.

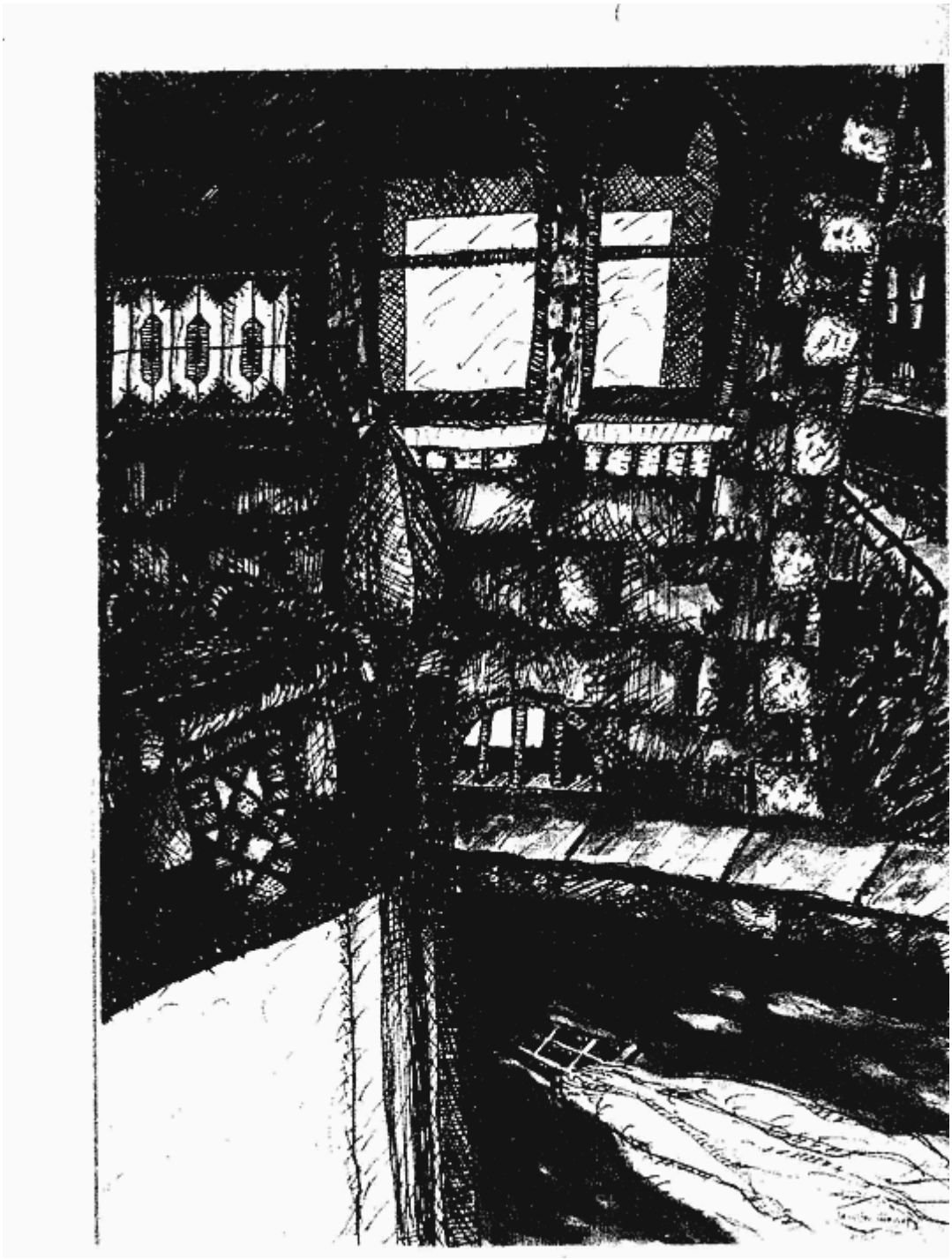
I have no memory of the explanation my mother or my father might have offered me as the reason I had to stay in the house the rest of that day. Actually I had no desire to go outdoors that winter morning, not while that voice, whose mystery remained undispelled by my mother or my father, continued to speak to me in its harsh and quietly distant tone from all the dim corners of the house, as the snowflakes floated outside every window, repeating over and over that the ice was breaking up on the river.

It was not many days afterward that my parents placed me in a hospital where I was administered several potent medications and other forms of treatment. On the way to the hospital my father restrained me in the back seat of the car while my mother served as driver, and I calmed down only during those brief moments when we passed across an old bridge that was built over a fairly wide river which I had never before seen.

During my stay in the hospital I found that it was the medications that I was given, rather than the other forms of treatment, that allowed me to grasp the nature of the voice which I had heard on a particular winter morning. I knew that my parents would be crossing that old bridge whenever they came to visit me at the hospital, so on the day when my doctor and a close relative of mine appeared in my room to explain to me the details of a certain "tragic event," I was the first one to speak. Before they could tell me of my mother and father's fate, and the way in which it had all happened, I said to them: "The ice has broken up on the river."

And the voice speaking these words was not the voice of a child but a harsh yet whispery voice emanating from the

depths of that great and ancient machinery which powered, according to its own faulty and unknown mechanisms, the most infinitesimal movements of the world as I knew it. Thus, as my doctor and a close relative of mine explained further what had happened to my parents, I only stared out the window, watching the machinery (into which I now had been assimilated) as it produced each snowflake that fell one by one outside the window of my hospital room.



III
The Astronomic Blur

Along a street of very old houses there was a building that was not a house at all but a little store which kept itself open for business at all hours of the day and night, every single day of the year. At first the store appeared to me as merely primitive, a throwback to some earlier time when a place of business might be allowed to operate in an otherwise residential district, however decayed the houses of the neighborhood may have been. But it was much more than primitive in the usual sense, for the little store declared no name for itself, offered no outward sign to give an indication of its place in the world around it. It was only the local residents who called it "the little store," when they spoke of it at all.

There was a small window beside the dark wooden door of the building, but if one tried to peer through the foggy glass of this window, nothing recognizable could ever be seen—only a swirling blur of indefinite shapes. And although the building's interior lights were always left on, even in the middle of the night, it was not the bright steady illumination of electricity that seemed to shine through the window of the place but a dim, vaguely flickering glow. Neither was anyone spied who might have been regarded as the propri-

etor of the little store, and no one was ever seen either going into or coming out of it, least of all the people in the surrounding neighborhood. Even if a passing car stopped in front and someone got out of the vehicle with the apparent intention of entering the store, they would never get farther than the sidewalk before turning around, getting back inside their car, and driving away. The children in the area always crossed to the opposite side of the street when walking by the little store.

Of course I was curious about this building from the time I first moved into one of the old houses in the neighborhood. I immediately noticed what I then considered the primitive, virtually primal nature of the little store, and I would at great length observe this darkly luminous structure whenever I went out walking, as I often did, in the late hours of the night. I followed this practice for some time, never noticing any change in the little store, never seeing anything that I had not seen the first night I began observing the place.

Then one night something did change in the little store, and something also changed in the neighborhood around it. It was only for a moment that the dim glow burning within the little store seemed to flare up before returning to its usual state of a dull, smoldering flicker. This was all that I saw. Nevertheless, that night I did not return to my home, because it was now glowing with the same primordial light as that within the little store. All the old houses in the neighborhood were lit up in the same way, all of their little windows glowing dimly at that late hour. *No one will ever again emerge from those houses,* I thought as I abandoned the streets of that neighborhood. *Nor will anyone ever desire to enter them.*

Perhaps I had seen too deeply into the nature of the little store, and it was simply warning me to look no further. On the other hand, perhaps I had been an accidental witness to something else altogether, some plan or process whose ultimate stage is impossible to foresee, although there still comes to me, on certain nights, the dream or mental image of a dark

sky in which the stars themselves burn low with a dim, flickering light that illuminates an indefinite swirling blur wherein it is not possible to observe any definite shapes or signs.

IV
The Abyss of Organic Forms

For years I lived with my half-brother, who had been confined to a wheelchair since childhood due to a congenital disease of the spine. Although placid much of the time, my brother, or rather half-brother, would frequently gaze upon me with a bitter and somehow brutish stare. His eyes were such a strange shade of gray, so pale and yet so luminous, that they were the first thing one noticed upon approaching him, and the fact that he inhabited a wheelchair always took second place to the unusual, the truly demonic character of his eyes, in which there was something that I could never bring myself to name.

It was only on rare occasions that my half-brother left the house in which he and I lived together, and these were almost exclusively those times when, at his insistence, I took him to a local race course where horses ran most afternoons during the racing season. There we watched the animals come parading out onto the track and run every race from first to last on a given day, never placing a single wager on any of them, although we always brought home a racing program which contained the names of and performance statistics relating to all the horses we had seen. For years I observed

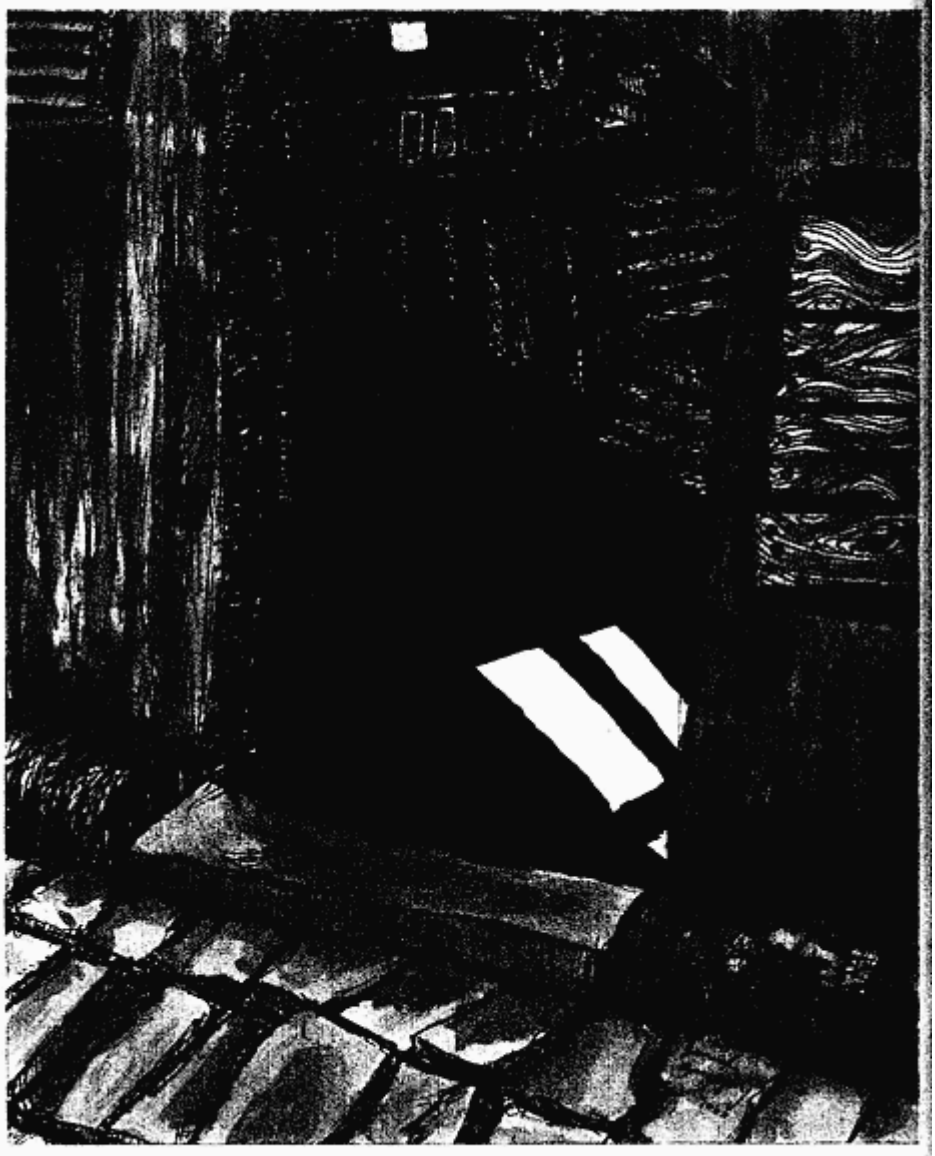
my brother, as he sat in his wheelchair just behind the fence that bordered the racetrack, and I noticed how intensely he gazed upon those horses, his gray eyes displaying a different aspect altogether from the bitter and brutish quality they always assumed when we were at home. On days when we did not visit the race course, he would pore over the old racing programs containing the names of countless horses and the complex statistics relating to their competitive performance, as well as information regarding their physical nature, including the age of the horses and their various colors, whether brown or bay, roan or gray.

One day I returned to the house where I had lived for many years with my half-brother and found his wheelchair empty in the middle of our living room. Surrounding it in a circle were pieces of paper torn from the old racing programs that he collected. A rather considerable mound of these scraps of paper were heaped around my brother's, my half-brother's, wheelchair, and on each of them was printed the name of one the many horses we had seen in our visits to the race course. I myself was quite familiar with these names: Avatara, Royal Troubadour, Hallview Spirit, Mechanical Harry T, and so on. Then I noticed that there was a trail of these torn pieces of paper which seemed to lead away from the wheelchair and toward the front door. I followed them outside the house, where I found a few more fragments of old racing programs out on the porch. But the trail ended even before I reached the sidewalk, the small scraps of paper having been dispersed by the brisk winds of a cold September day. After investigating for some time, I could find nothing to indicate what had become of my brother—that is, my half-brother—nor could anyone else. No explanation by any agency or person ever sufficiently illuminated the reason for or method of his disappearance.

It was not long after this incident that, for the first time in my life, I went alone to the race course which my brother and I had visited together on so many previous occasions.

There I watched the horses come parading out onto the track for each race from first to last.

Following the final race of the day, as the horses were leaving the track to return to the area where they were kept in barns, I saw that one of these animals, a roan stallion, had eyes that were the palest and most peculiar shade of gray. When this particular horse passed the spot where I was standing, these eyes turned upon me, staring directly into my own eyes in a way that seemed bitter and thoroughly brutish and which conveyed to me the sense of something unusual, something truly demonic that I could never bring myself to name.



V
The Phenomenal Frenzy

For a time I had been looking to buy a house in which, barring unforeseen developments, I was planning to live out the rest of my life. During this period of house-searching, I found myself considering properties that were increasingly distant from those nearest to them, until ultimately my search for a house in which to live out the rest of my life took place entirely in remote areas miles from the most out-of-the-way towns. I myself was sometimes surprised at the backroad landscapes in which I ventured to investigate some old place where a real estate agent had sent me or upon which I simply happened in the course of wandering farther and farther from any kind of developed region, or even one that had the least proximity to other houses.

It was while driving my car through one of these backroad landscapes, on a windy November afternoon, that I discovered the sort of isolated house which at that point was the only conceivable place where I could live out the rest of my life with any chance of being at peace in the world. Although this two-story frame structure stood in a relatively level and austere backroad landscape, with a few bare trees and a ruined water tower intervening between it and the dull au-

tumnal horizon, I did not become aware of its presence until I had nearly passed it by. There was no sign of landscaping immediately surrounding the house, only the same grayish scrub grass that covered the ground everywhere else in the area as far as the eye could see. Yet the house itself seemed relatively new in its construction, and was not exactly the type of run-down place in which I expected to live out the rest of my life in decayed seclusion.

I mentioned that it was a windy day, and, as I stood contemplating that spectacularly isolated house, the atmosphere of that vast backroad landscape became almost cyclonic. Furthermore, the sky was beginning to darken at the edges of the horizon, even though there were no clouds to be seen and several hours remained until the approach of twilight. As the force of the winds grew stronger, the only other features in that backroad landscape—the few bare trees and the ruined water tower—seemed to be receding into the distance away from me, while the house before which I stood appeared to loom closer and closer. In a thoughtless moment of panic I ran back to my car, struggling to open the door as the wind pounded against it. As soon as I was inside the car, I started the engine and drove as fast as conditions would allow. Nevertheless, it seemed that I was making no progress along the route by which I came to that region: the horizon was still darkening and receding ahead of me while the house in my rearview mirror remained constant in its looming perspective. Eventually, however, things began to change and that backroad landscape, along with the isolated two-story house, diminished behind me.

Only later did I ask myself where I would live out the rest of my life if not there, in that backroad landscape where there stood a house which seemed perfectly designed for me. But this same place, a true resting place in which I should have been able to live out the rest of my life in some kind of peace, was now only one more thing that I had to fear.

Afterword

In addition to the five stories presented here, I also found notes, mostly in the form of unconnected phrases, of a sixth story with the apparent working title of "Sideshow." Following the manner of the other pieces, this story similarly seemed determined to be no more than a dreamlike vignette, an episode of "peculiar and ridiculous show business," to quote from the author's notes. There were other unique phrases or ideas that appeared in these notes which also emerged in my conversations with the author as we sat in the corner booth of that coffee shop throughout the course of several nights. For example, such phrases as "the volatility of things" and "unexpected mutations" appeared repeatedly, as if these were to serve as the guiding principles of this presumably abandoned narrative.

I suppose that I should not have been surprised to find a reference to myself among these notes, since the author had clearly characterized his work to me as "autobiographical wretchedness." In these notes, then, I am fairly designated as the "other man in the coffee shop" and as a "pitiful insomniac who manufactures artistic conundrums for himself in order to distract his mind from the sideshow town in which he has spent his life." The words "sideshow town" appear earlier in what seems to be the intended opening sentence of the aborted story. This particular sentence is interesting in that it directly suggests a continuity with one of the other